**Chinese students, too qualified to be true?**

Rob Schmitz/Marketplace

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**Rob Schmitz:** If you walk down the street in Shanghai, it's hard to miss the advertisements for college placement agencies. In big bold letters, they promise -- some even guarantee -- your child's admission to an American university. The price: $5,000, $6,000, sometimes $7,000.

Jiang Xueqin is a well-known education reformer in China. He also heads the International division at Peking University High School -- one of China's best high schools. He has followed college placement agencies for years. He says this is how many of them deliver on their admission promises: they falsify students application materials.

**Jiang Xueqin:** There's a lot of pressure on the agencies to write the application essays, to fake transcripts, to fake recommendation letters. This is just general business practice in China to falsify a lot of documentation.

A report by consulting firm Zinch China seems to confirm this. Zinch advises American colleges and universities on recruiting Chinese students. The firm interviewed agents and admissions consultants, as well as more than 200 Beijing students headed to U.S. schools. Zinch estimates 90 percent of these students submitted false recommendation letters; 70 percent had other people write their personal essays, and half of them submitted forged high school transcripts. Two former employees of a college placement agency told Marketplace they routinely falsified application materials. We did not use their names, because they feared they would lose their current jobs.

**Anonymous employee 1:** I wrote reference letters on behalf of students' teachers and bosses. They were never willing to spend time to do this, so I just wrote them myself and they signed their names.

She worked for Shanghai Shenyuan, a placement agency connected to the University of Shanghai. It's one of more than 400 agencies licensed by China's government.

Here's how the agency works: A student comes to Shanghai Shenyuan for help getting into a U.S. school. If Shenyuan succeeds, the agency collects -- usually from the parents -- the equivalent of $6,000. Both former employees say this put pressure on them to make absolutely sure that students were admitted to a U.S. college, even if they didn't have the grades to get in.

**Anonymous employee 2:** They'd definitely not be accepted to American colleges with their transcripts. But if students tell their high schools they're applying to an American college, most schools will revise their grades to reflect a B or an A average.

The reason, this former employee said, was simple.

**Anonymous employee 2:** So that they can boast that their students are admitted by well-known American colleges.

Both employees estimated they wrote college application essays for three out of every four students the agency handled.

**Anonymous employee 1:** I usually just made them up using my own ideas. Sometimes I'd browse the internet or read magazines for inspiration.

Over the years, Shanghai Shenyuan has had partnerships with more than a dozen U.S. universities, including the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point. For weeks, Shanghai Shenyuan's director ignored Marketplace's repeated requests for an interview. But then we approached the University of Wisconsin and shared what we had found. That university promptly terminated its relationship with Shenyuan. The next day, Zhang Hong, Shanghai Shenyuan's director, contacted us.

**Zhang Hong:** These are serious allegations and we are shocked. Faking application material is absolutely not allowed at Shenyuan.

Zhang says he's investigating his agents for any wrongdoing.

Jim Miller, former president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling in the United States, says he's not surprised at what Marketplace found.

**Jim Miller:** There are numerous colleges that are having difficulty assuring the integrity of the essays, transcripts and credentials, coming from other countries, and in particular in Asia.

Peking University High School's Jiang Xueqin says both the agencies and American universities benefit from the status quo.

**Jiang Xueqin:** From an education perspective, what is happening is terrible. But from a business perspective, what's happening makes perfect sense.

There are now more than 130,000 students from China at U.S. universities. Many of them paying full tuition. They make up nearly 20 percent of all foreign students and this percentage is only expected to grow in the years to come.

In Shanghai, I'm Rob Schmitz for Marketplace.

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